

# AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY BLAKE

A R T I C L E

## Revisioning Blake's Oothoon

Harriet Kramer Linkin

Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly, Volume 23, Issue 4, Spring 1990, pp. 184-194



## Revisioning Blake's Oothoon

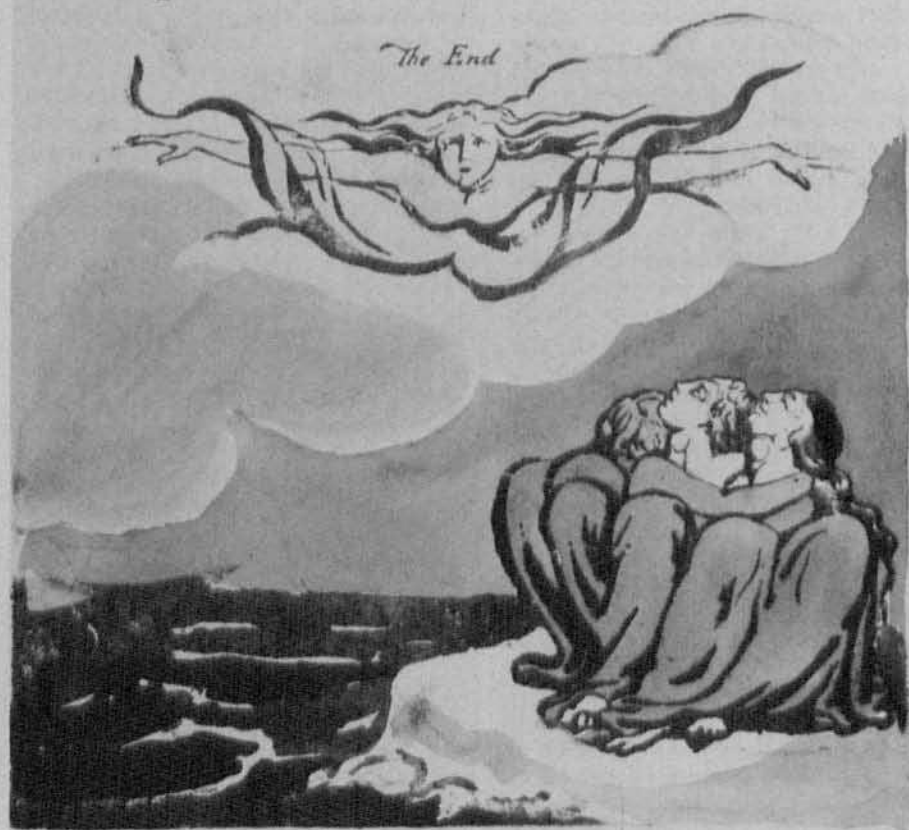
by Harriet Kramer Linkin

In applying feminist perspectives to Blake studies critics continue to explore the disparity between Blake's larger advocacy of human liberation and his more limited representation of the female in his poetry. Arguing for a Blake who is alternately feminist, sexist, engendered, beyond gender or struggling towards a truly androgynous vision, most implicitly accept Fox's general categories for Blake's portrayal of the female: positive/passive, pernicious/active, and, in the rarest of instances, active/good.<sup>1</sup> Disagreements occur in slotting specific figures into those categories, perhaps none quite as frustrating as Oothoon in *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*. Early modern critics hailed Oothoon as the perfect vehicle for Blake's psychosexual beliefs, hearing the poet's voice resound in her cries for "Love! Love! Love! happy happy Love! free as the mountain wind!" (7:16, E 50).<sup>2</sup> Although critics celebrated her imaginative awakening as active and good, they still placed the poem within the cycle of Experience because Oothoon remained unable to share her newly organized desires with Theotormon.<sup>3</sup> In 1973 Peterson broke with standard readings of *Visions* by positing imperfections in Oothoon herself as the source of her lack of fulfillment.<sup>4</sup> Since then, more and more critics fault Oothoon rather than her situation for the seeming paralysis and prophetic failure that ends her story, suggesting she adopts the strategies of her oppressors to become pernicious or passive or, for some, both.<sup>5</sup> This shifting characterization of Oothoon foregrounds recent sociocultural history in that the liberated Oothoon of the decades culminating in the 1960s is revisioned as the co-

(i. p.)  
 Where the cold miser spreads his gold! or does the bright cloud  
 On his stone threshold; does his eye behold the beam that brings  
 Expansion to the eye of pity? or will he bind himself  
 Beside the ox to the hard furrow! does not that mild beam blot  
 The bat, the owl, the glowing tiger, and the king of night?  
 The sea fowl takes the wintry blast, for a covering to her limbs;  
 And the wild snake, the pestilence to adorn him with gems & gold.  
 And trees & birds, & beasts, & men, behold their eternal joy.  
 Arise you little glancing wings, and sing your wildest joy!  
 Arise and drink your bliss, for every thing that lives is holy!

Thus every morning wails Oothoon, but Theotormon sits  
 Upon the marginal ocean conversing with Shadow's dove.

The Daughters of Albion hear her woes, & echo back her sighs.



1. William Blake, *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, 1793, plate 8. Courtesy of the Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection.

opted Oothoon of the 70s and 80s. Because I believe Oothoon stands for something uniquely positive through-

out Blake's poetic career—in *Visions*, *Europe*, *Milton*, and *Jerusalem*—I hope to challenge current negative

estimations of her by questioning whether *Visions* ends in stasis as well as in her complicity. Instead, I argue (1) that Blake concludes *Visions* with two strategic disjunctions to prompt double vision: the emotive power of Oothoon's language counters the narrator's assertion of paralysis, which is subsequently undermined by the illuminator's image of Oothoon in flight, and (2) that Oothoon's experience is ultimately progressive rather than degenerative.

Assessments of Oothoon's general failure derive from a negative reading of the ending, where the darker visions of the narrator follow Oothoon's last joyous exhortations:

Arise you little glancing wings, and sing  
your infant joy!  
Arise and drink your bliss, for every  
thing that lives is holy!

Thus every morning wails Oothoon, but  
Theotormon sits  
Upon the margind ocean conversing  
with shadows dire.

The Daughters of Albion hear her woes,  
& eccho back her sighs.  
(8:6-13, E 51)

By dramatically shifting both the temporal and emotional planes of the text, these concluding lines replace conventional narrative past tense with a continuing present and move from exultation to resignation. Just as Oothoon reaches the apex of her awakening, the narrative reduces her culminating vision to daily activity; her resounding proclamations of liberty turn into the narrator's "wails," "sighs," and "woes." Given the narrator's disconcerting summary view of Oothoon's orations, many readers believe her prophetic insights conclude with failure, since she does not appear to free Theotormon or her sisters.

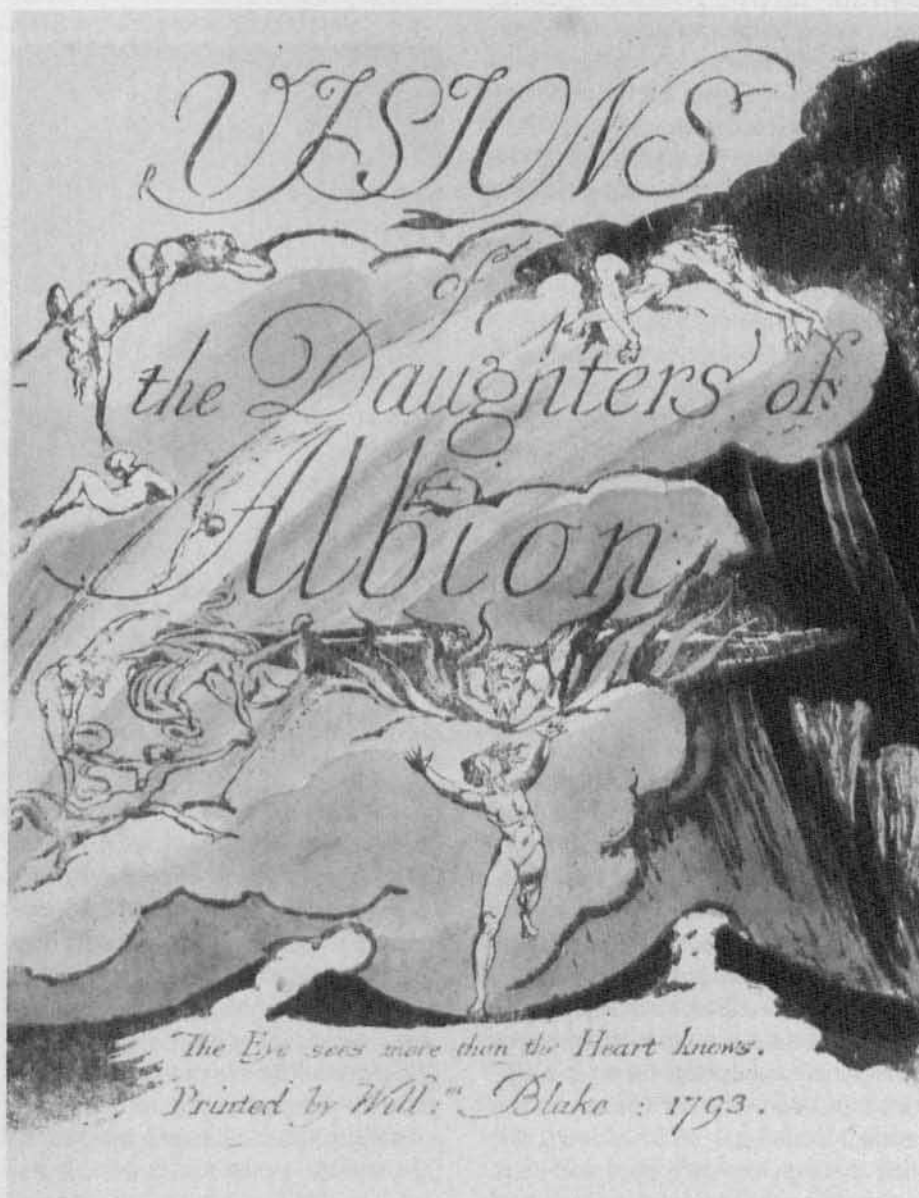
Although the illumination that follows the last three lines depicts Oothoon in flight (pl. 8, illus. 1),<sup>6</sup> supplanting the Urizenic pursuer illustrated on the title page (pl. ii, illus. 2), and possibly bearing the word to her

sisters, most critics envision her at tale's end locked in the static tableau Blake illustrates in his frontispiece (pl. i, illus. 3). Even the more optimistic Johnson and Grant believe the bound tableau scene eclipses the final visual impression of hard-won freedom:

Oothoon never actually escapes from the two warped lovers she is bound to. The three appear locked in their situation in the full-page frontispiece (or tailpiece in one copy), plate i, in a sort of "No Exit" triangle, even though Oothoon has achieved psychological liberation and brings her

message to the Daughters of Albion in the final design.<sup>7</sup>

As Johnson and Grant indicate, Blake used the frontispiece as a tailpiece in the early (if not original) copy A of *Visions*, but then consistently positioned it as frontispiece in every other copy;<sup>8</sup> while shifting plates is the easiest mode of revision for a poet who loves to play with textual orderings, I believe Blake deliberately presented the tableau scene as frontispiece to avoid leaving viewers with a closing image of paralysis. Neverthe-



2. William Blake, *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, 1793, plate ii, title page. Courtesy of the Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection.



less, readers find the frontispiece an apt illustration of the poem's ending, accepting verbatim the narrator's vision of Oothoon.

Imaging that bound Oothoon, critics track back through the tale to uncover the character faults that account for her defeat. To some extent doing so reenacts Bromion's labeling of Oothoon as harlot after he rapes her; the narrator tells us Oothoon wails daily, and rather than question how this is true, we return to her story for the reasons why. Why, however, do we so readily take the narrator's final despairing description at face value? A work that impugns the validity of individual perceptions and perspectives, notes their dependence on the identity of the perceiver, refrains from identifying the narrator (unlike many other Blake books),<sup>9</sup> and repeatedly points to the imaginative necessity of double vision requires us to question the authority of the narrative conclusion.

Rather than support or even describe the ending, the frontispiece establishes how individuals shape or frame what is seen. Circumscribing the primary image—Oothoon and Bromion bound back to back while Theotormon covers his head—is a cave whose outline forms a human skull while the sun above Bromion's head doubles as an eye (in many copies). As mere illustration of the text, the image might refer to two specific passages: the narrator's description of how Theotormon "folded his black jealous waters round the adulterate pair / Bound back to back in Bromions caves terror & meekness dwell" (2:4-5, E 46) and Oothoon's glance at the sun through Theotormon's eyes, where "Instead of morn arises a bright shadow, like an eye" (2:35, E 47). As illumination, Blake's sun-eye and cave-skull indicate how perspective influences perception; both the eye and I of the perceiver (narrator and reader) determine what is seen. We look through our own eyes and skull to see the mirroring eyes and skull of the narrator peering back at us. And

the frontispiece's primary image of the trio recedes into these reflecting mirrors, frustrating efforts to "converge upon a critical center; Oothoon wails on just at the margin of our comprehension."<sup>10</sup> Instead of revealing the way Oothoon's story ends, the frontispiece diagrams how visions accrue through individual perspective.

The title page that follows similarly comments on the nature of perception through its illumination and language. The title emphasizes plural vision with a grammatical ambiguity that calls attention to the identity of the perceiver-



3. William Blake, *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, 1793, plate i, frontispiece. Courtesy of the Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection.

narrator by making us wonder whose visions constitute *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*. Does Blake use "of" as a possessive indicating the Daughters who see these visions or as a preposition pointing toward an external narrator who envisions the Daughters? Why are the visions multiple? The plurality of vision could refer to the three participants in the tale, or the three days over which the tale ensues, but these plurals still occur within a single overall narrative

vision.<sup>11</sup> Are they "visions" because textual narration differs from visual narration? Is the narrator also the illuminator, as Blake's title page to *The Book of Urizen* suggests (where Urizen writes with one hand and illustrates with the other, pl. 1, illus. 4), or do narrator and illuminator offer separate and equally unreliable visions? Perhaps the visions are plural because internal evidence offers the viewer more than one way of seeing Oothoon's experience, overriding any single reading of the conclusion. The motto warns, "The Eye sees more than the Heart knows" (pl. ii, E 45): beyond its obvious application to Theotormon, Bromion, Oothoon, and her sisters, the motto speaks directly to readers whose eyes see more of Blake's composite intent than either the verbal or visual text establishes.<sup>12</sup>

Among the visual cues of the title page, the vertically and horizontally centered "i" of "Albion" is augmented by a figure crouching over the "bi"; reminiscent of the bowed (unseeing) head of Theotormon (pl. i) and anticipating the bowed (unseeing) Daughters depicted later (pl. 7), the figure implicates the unitary perspective of a seeing eye/I. Plate 1 (illus. 5) similarly attacks the seeing eye/I through the annotated "i"s of "Visions": the first is dotted with a dreamy female figure on a cloud while an archer aims his arrow through the second. Other figures on the top of plate 1 slyly undermine the closure of narrative vision: the illuminator frames the printed word "Visions" with a curved "V" on the left and a sinuously robed figure on the right—just as the narrator frames Oothoon's story with introductory and concluding present tense statements. That same "V" sets off the text's enlarged first word—"Enslav'd"—when paired with the comma that follows. A robed figure also appears to drip paint or tears over the word "weep,"<sup>13</sup> hinting, perhaps, at a narrative inability to see beyond enslavement. As the illuminator suggests, the



4. William Blake, *First Book of Urizen*, 1794, plate 1. Courtesy of the Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection.

narrator may well be locked in a vision of slavery precluding other visions; the illuminator's efforts to undermine the narrator's vision here, however, dangerously minimize the morally irreducible fact of slavery. Both visions invite serious scrutiny.

While the frontispiece, title page, and annotating figures above the text on plate 1 incriminate unitary perspective, the third preliminary plate illuminates double vision. Almost evenly divided into text and image, plate iii (illus. 6) provides another instance of the discrepancy between various views. Oothoon's first-person account in "The Argument" summarizes the opening actions of *Visions* from a fairly physical perspective (in what critics identify as a flat, repressed voice<sup>14</sup>): she loves Theotormon, hides in a vale, plucks a flower, rises to meet him, and is raped by Bromion. Probably for Theotormon and Bromion, Oothoon's plot summary accurately describes her story; even the Daughters—and some critics—might accept her eight lines as the shell of what happens to Oothoon, since she

never seems to move beyond the rape in her relationship with Theotormon.

The illumination below the text provides a counter-image by depicting the glorious imaginative awakening "The Argument" omits: Oothoon not only reveals and revels in double vision by seeing the Marygold as flower and nymph (as do we), but also demonstrates her prophetic response in kissing "the joy as it flies."<sup>15</sup> When we view the entire page in context, "The Argument" shows Oothoon's enslavement and enlightenment as well as the need to connect emotional truths with physical experience. Most important, it offers a holistic way of reading the conclusion: just as "The Argument" requires text and image for cohesion, the final plate of *Visions* achieves balance when we conflate the illumination with the narration. Like Oothoon and the Marygold, we could welcome Oothoon as she flies.

To credit the illuminator with a true vision, and castigate the narrator for a limited one, however, abrogates the larger implication of double vision. Just as the narrator's perspective determines perception, so too the illuminator's. Oothoon's story contains more than rape, as "The Argument"'s illumination shows; at the same time, nothing mitigates the painful horror of rape or victimization or slavery, despite the illuminator's optimistic efforts here. And the illuminator is not always an optimist. When Oothoon asserts she is "Open to joy and to delight where ever beauty appears" (6:22, E 50), she goes on to describe how she would "in evening mild. wearied with work; / Sit on a bank and draw the pleasures of this free born joy" (7:12, E 50); directly above her words the illuminator ironically juxtaposes an image of the weary Daughters sitting on such a bank (pl. 7, illus. 7), bringing to mind the hard truth of the Daughters' enslavement. Earlier the illuminator undercuts Theotormon's anguished "and in what rivers swim the sorrows? and upon

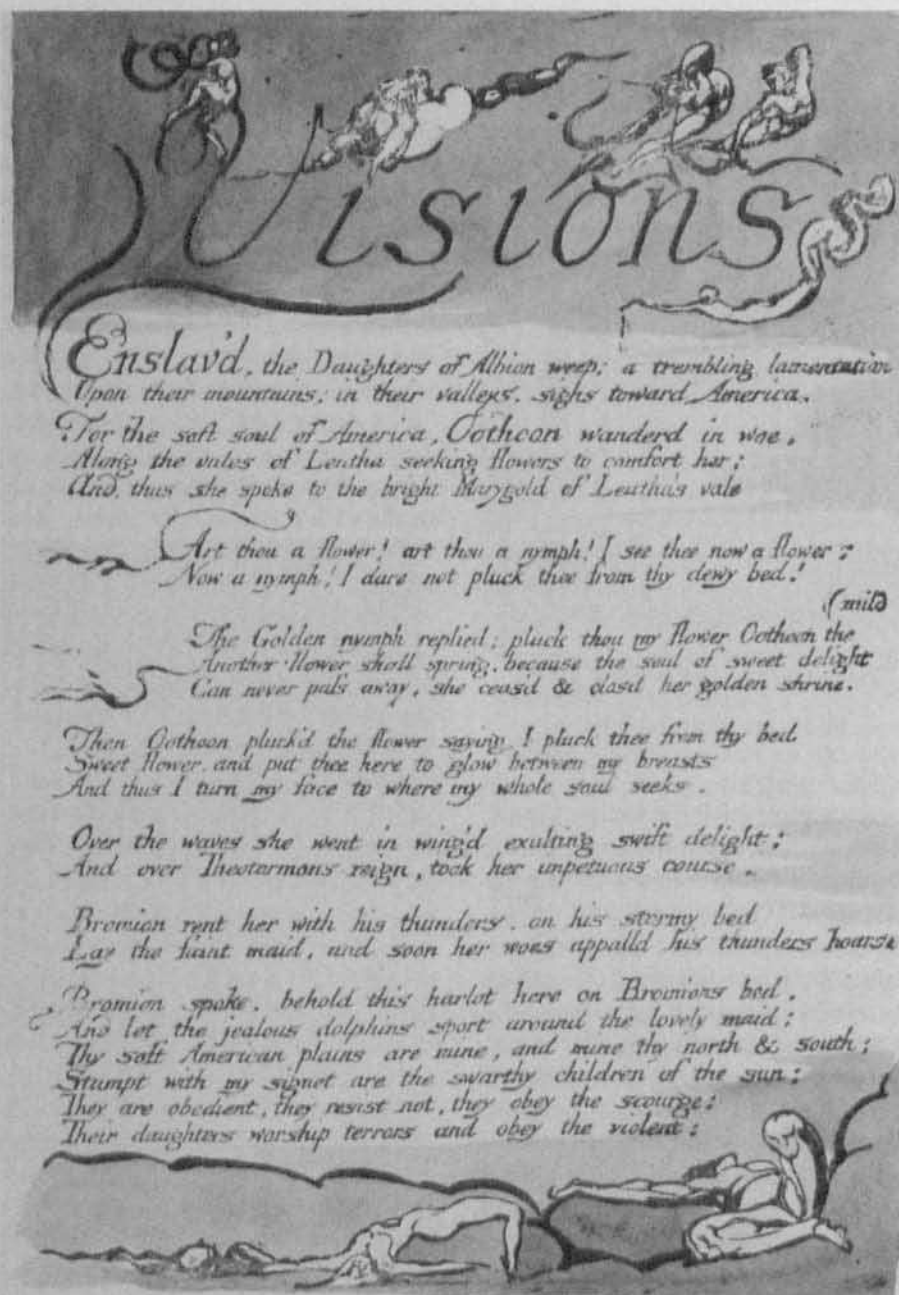
what mountains / Wave shadows of discontent?" (3:25-4:1, E 47-48) by presenting Oothoon chained in a shadowy wave that not only hovers over Theotormon's bowed head but also ironically rises out of his very words "Wave shadows of discontent" (pl. 4, illus. 8). In viewing the conclusion's disjunctive components, we should not reject the narrator's vision for the illuminator's image or Oothoon's words, but see how these visions oppose one another to effect plural understanding: "Without Contraries is no progression" (*Marriage* 3:6, E 34).

The preliminary plates establish hermeneutic principles that condition our reading of the narrative plates, where narration and illumination often present competing perspectives on how to interpret the physical and emotional events in *Visions*. Rather than repeat the excellent critical accounts of what happens in *Visions*, the symbolic identities of the main participants, and the nature of Oothoon's prophetic awakening,<sup>16</sup> I turn now to a brief summary of the criticism that tends to blame Oothoon's ostensible failure on her own imperfections. One group sees Oothoon as flawed because (1) she depends so much on Theotormon for her identity that she becomes no more than a reflection (Peterson, Latin, Anderson, Hilton), (2) she decries the virgins and priests who use nets and snares, is "snared" by Bromion, but offers to trap girls for Theotormon (Peterson, Cooke, Anderson, Haigwood, Hilton), (3) she is inactive despite her prophetic stance on action, neither forcing a relationship with Theotormon (Peterson) nor leaving him (Peterson, Anderson), and (4) she reveals Urizenic traits through her manipulative use of language (Haigwood). A second group looks to Blake himself for Oothoon's shortcomings: too engendered by his times to conceive of a truly liberated woman, he does not make Oothoon powerful enough to change her situation (Fox,



Mellor, Ostriker). Although I share the critical bias of this second group, I disagree that Oothoon ultimately fails. While her progress towards prophecy is not constant or direct, she undergoes what I outline below as a developmental process that results in her acquiring prophetic stature by the conclusion of the poem; whatever discrepancies remain stem from Blake's historical inability to see beyond fundamental inequities in his system.

On the first day her reactions to the rape demonstrate real psychological complexity: some instances seem to suggest she accepts the guilt thrust upon her by Bromion and Theotormon while others hint at the beginnings of a visionary response. Unlike the weeping, paralyzed Theotormon, Oothoon does not weep; the narrator's characterization of her writhing limbs and "howl incessant" may point to active, Rintrah-like rage.<sup>17</sup> Although she seeks to purify herself of someone else's pollution (despite the Marygold's assertion that "the soul of sweet delight / Can never pass away" 1:9-10, E 46), she wants to cleanse the bosom bathed in the Marygold's glow and not her rent loins: "Rend away this defiled bosom that I may reflect. / The image of Theotormon on my pure transparent breast" (2:15-16, E 46). Defining Oothoon's desire to reflect Theotormon as limiting ignores its affirming dimension: rather than replace Bromion's signet with Theotormon's eagle-inscribed insignia, she hopes to revive the Marygold's glow through Theotormon's image (although her call for a Urizenic, self-lacerating method of purification indicates feelings of culpability). The narrator's summary statement sheds more light on narrative perspective than the consequences of Oothoon's demand; calling Theotormon's responding smile severe, the narrator declares "her soul reflects the smile; / As the clear spring mudded with feet of beasts grows pure & smiles" (2:18-19, E 46), but it is impossible for us to ascertain much less



5. William Blake, *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, 1793, plate 1. Courtesy of the Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection.

accept the validity of the narrator's judgment: can the narrator see her soul? It is the narrator, and not Oothoon, who concludes the first day with a simile that represents her as no more than a reflecting spring.

On the second day she surges beyond the limitations of the first by asserting her essential purity and rejecting Urizen's definition of the five

senses, explaining how former teachings falsely restrained her vision: "They told me that I had five senses to inclose me up. / And they inclos'd my infinite brain into a narrow circle" (2:31-32, E 47). Moving beyond personal understanding, she offers the first of the several glorious, image-specific orations that decimate Urizen's law of the senses:

With what sense is it that the chicken  
shuns the ravenous hawk?  
With what sense does the tame pigeon  
measure out the expanse?  
With what sense does the bee form cells?  
have not the mouse & frog  
Eyes and ears and sense of touch? yet are  
their habitations.  
And their pursuits, as different as their  
forms and as their joys:

(3:2-6, E 47)

Through language that evolves from the innocent, revelatory query Oothoon asks of the Marygold—"Art thou a flower! art thou a nymph!" (1:6, E 46)—to the powerful, rhetorical questions offered to Theotormon and Bromion, Oothoon's expanded sensory awareness moves her further and further towards prophecy.

While they acknowledge Oothoon's increasing awareness, critics also note two instances of regression on this second day. After Oothoon rejects the limited schooling of the five senses, she turns to Theotormon to celebrate the new morning; because he fails to share or confirm her perceptions, his eyes take in a very different landscape, uniformly colored by his despair: "Instead of morn arises a bright shadow, like an eye / In the eastern cloud: instead of night a sickly charnel house / That Theotormon hears me not! to him the night and morn / Are both alike" (2:35-38, E 47). Worried by her apparent dependency on Theotormon's perception, some cite this moment to show how Oothoon's vision fails.<sup>18</sup> Instead, we might see Oothoon's desire for visual intercourse with Theotormon as confirmation of her double vision: her ability to see the world through his eyes indicates a strength, rather than a weakness. What she sees saddens her, but does not destroy her progress towards prophecy, her sense of her own identity or her independent vision of the landscape; it is after she looks through Theotormon's shadowy perception that she offers her powerful assertion of multiple sensory experience for different creatures.

The second instance of regression is problematic, for Oothoon appears to bribe Theotormon with silence and uses images of defilement to establish her purity:

Silent I hover all the night, and all day  
could be silent.  
If Theotormon once would turn his  
loved eyes upon me;  
How can I be defiled when I reflect thy  
image pure?  
Sweetest the fruit that the worm feeds  
on. & the soul prey'd on by woe  
The new wash'd lamb ting'd with the  
village smoke & the bright swan  
By the red earth of our immortal river: I  
bathe my wings.  
And I am white and pure to hover round  
Theotormon's breast.

(3:14-19, E 47)

Like the dissembling virgin she attacks the very next day, Oothoon extends a promise of silence in exchange for one look from Theotormon. Not yet a hypocrite, Oothoon actually might learn to condemn the virgin's silence because she keeps her promise when Theotormon finally responds.

More disturbing than her promise, she seems to go back on her prophetic declaration of essential purity in asking how she can be defiled when she reflects Theotormon's "image pure." Given the linguistic ambiguity we do not know whether she means Theotormon himself or his image of purity; in either case Anderson considers her metaphors for purity defiled through external forces revelatory of how Oothoon continues to see herself in Theotormon's terms (5). I believe Oothoon consciously adopts Theotormon's terms to focus her message for his level of awareness. Just as Oothoon's address on sensory differentiation speaks directly to Bromion, her semantic choices here disclose immense sensitivity in trying to lead Theotormon to her own position with images culled from his perceptual system. Because the responses of Theotormon and Bromion echo the words Oothoon offers, they show how well she reads them. That her speech



6. William Blake, *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, 1793, plate iii. Courtesy of the Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection.

does provoke a response from the nearly paralyzed Theotormon demonstrates the efficacy of her language. When Theotormon finally "turns his loved eyes upon her" through his reply, she keeps her word and maintains silence.

As the third day begins, Oothoon concludes her vow of silence with an exponential leap of awareness, turning her attention from Theotormon to Urizen with a lamentation so sweeping and long it constitutes roughly half of the text.<sup>19</sup> Extending her basic denial of Bromion's "one law for both the lion and the ox" (4:22, E 48) to human systems, Oothoon attacks Urizen through a brilliant series of prophetic utterances that connect economics, agriculture, religion, education, and marriage:

How can the giver of gifts experience  
the delights of the merchant?  
How the industrious citizen the pains of  
the husbandman.



How different far the fat fed hireling with  
hollow drum;  
Who buys whole cornfields into wastes,  
and sings upon the heath:  
How different their eye and ear! how  
different the world to them!  
With what sense does the parson claim  
the labour of the farmer?  
What are his nets & gins & traps.  
(5:12-18, E 48-49)

Just as the forms, habitations, and pursuits of animals point toward multi-valent experience, human systems demonstrate such vast differences we cannot impose one code of interpretation. The giver of gifts and the merchant may perform the same basic function—transferring an item to a new owner—and even require one another to perform that function, but any effort to evaluate their actions demands completely separate scales.

No one disputes the depth and range of Oothoon's prophetic statements on human systems; some become uneasy when Oothoon moves from her broad analysis of limited Urizenic morality to refocus attention on her own situation. Describing how the child's natural sexuality is further and further repressed until that child grows up to be a virgin hypocrite, Oothoon expresses her frustration through a direct attack on Theotormon:

Then com'st thou forth a modest virgin  
knowing to dissemble  
With nets found under thy night pillow,  
to catch virgin joy,  
And brand it with the name of whore; &  
sell it in the night,  
In silence, ev'n without a whisper, and  
in seeming sleep:  
... And does my Theotormon seek this  
hypocrite modesty!  
This knowing, artful, secret, fearful,  
cautious, trembling hypocrite.  
Then is Oothoon a whore indeed! and all  
the virgin joys  
Of life are harlots: and Theotormon is a  
sick mans dream  
And Oothoon is the crafty slave of selfish  
holiness.  
(6:10-20, E 49-50)

As Haigwood points out, Oothoon's language limits rather than invites

Theotormon's response through her does/then construction, which "doesn't ask Theotormon what he thinks and feels; she tells him, 'enslaving' his experience to her own 'system'" (88).<sup>20</sup> Haigwood's point is well-taken: Oothoon not only exhibits Urizenic behavior through syntax, but also adopts Bromion's reductive name-calling by conditionally branding herself a whore and Theotormon a "sick mans dream."

In Oothoon's defense, however, let us consider her self-righteous wrath. Oothoon lashes out in justified anger after her description of the virgin hypocrite's decorous silence; perhaps Oothoon *has* been made into "a whore indeed" if it is her silence rather than her great verbal sensitivity which finally prompts Theotormon's longed-for response. That the two lines describing how the hypocrite virgin brands sexuality with "the name of whore" and keeps silent constitute the exact center of Oothoon's one hundred and two line oration on the third day highlights their importance to her experience. Potentially co-opted by Urizen's system, Oothoon recoils from her similarity to the virgin with rage. Although she quickly retracts the names she calls herself—"But Oothoon is not so" (6:21, E 50)—she never corrects her nomination of Theotormon as a "sick mans dream." In fact, she perpetuates the image later on by describing someone who closely resembles Theotormon as sickened with self-love (7:17-22, E 50).

What critics cite most frequently as proof of Oothoon's downfall is her offer to catch girls for Theotormon:

But silken nets and traps of adamant will  
Oothoon spread,  
And catch for thee girls of mild silver, or  
of furious gold;  
I'll lie beside thee on a bank & view their  
wanton play  
In lovely copulation bliss on bliss with  
Theotormon:  
Red as the rosy morning, lustful as the  
first born beam,

Oothoon shall view his dear delight, nor  
e'er with jealous cloud  
Come in the heaven of generous love;  
nor selfish blightings bring.  
(7:24-29, E 50)

Although her "silken nets and traps of adamant" are meant to contrast with the web of age spun by the jealous, weeping lover in the section above, "grey and hoary! dark!" (7:19, E 50), Oothoon's apparent willingness to use these Urizenic tools awakens suspicions, given her denunciation of both the parson and the virgin for their nets and traps. Despite the negative connotations nets and traps generally bear, they may not be innately tainted in *Visions*: in measuring the parson's labor against the farmer's, Oothoon suggests a legitimate use for nets and traps: "With what sense does the parson claim the labour of the farmer? / What are his nets & gins & traps?" (5:17-18, E 49). At the same time *Marriage* insists that "All wholesom food is caught without a net or a trap" (7:13, E 36).

Even more troubling than her means, the offer itself alerts many critics to a weakness in Oothoon. Most wonder why Oothoon intimates she would be content to watch Theotormon copulate with other girls, as it exemplifies the voyeuristic sexuality Oothoon condemns in attacking "The self enjoyings of self denial" (7:9, E 50). Several points bear consideration: first, Blake's lines are sufficiently equivocal to suggest that Oothoon lies beside Theotormon "in lovely copulation" while the pair watch the wanton play of the girls; second, Oothoon never says she will only and always watch. Third, the entire episode sets up an antimony to the kind of looking the jealous lover performs in the section above, whose "lamplike eyes watching around the frozen marriage bed" (7:22, E 50) lock lovers into fruitless relationships. Fourth, and most important, she clearly follows the path Blake demarcates for enlightened Emanations by advocating a form of polygyny;<sup>21</sup> as Damon writes, "To save the marriage,



the Emanation must renounce her thirst for dominion and sacrifice her selfishness" (*Dictionary* 122). Oothoon's offer to trap girls for Theotormon justifiably distresses recent critics, but perhaps we should be troubled by Blake himself.

Oothoon goes on to end the third day's lamentation with a rousing finale that validates her tremendous progress towards prophetic stature. Rather than seize upon the negative aspects of her experience, I propose we consider that progress is not always swift and direct. Like the Los of Milton who succumbs to Satan's pleas only to recall that pity divides the soul, or who first joins Urizen to block Milton's journey before he remembers the prophecy of Eden, Oothoon must work through the obstacles in her path towards prophecy. Not at all static, Oothoon's language and experiences reveal increasing visionary awareness through leaps and surges. Although at first she addresses Theotormon alone (after the rape), she soon includes Bromion and then moves outward to Urizen, expanding the range of her commentary from sensory differentiation to human systems. She begins the second day with a call inviting Theotormon to "Arise," but by the end of the third, she broadens her scope immeasurably: "Arise you little glancing wings, and sing your infant joy! / Arise and drink your bliss, for every thing that lives is holy!" (8:9-10, E 51).

The narrator's conclusion not only undermines the emotional affect of Oothoon's visionary exhortations but also reverses any sense of progress: "Thus every morning wails Oothoon, but Theotormon sits / Upon the margin of ocean conversing with shadows dire" (8:11-12, E 51). Because Oothoon imagines turning into such a shadow through Theotormon's continued rejection, "Till beauty fades from off my shoulders darken'd and cast out, / A solitary shadow wailing on the margin of non-entity" (7:14-15, E 50), Hilton wonders if Theotormon's dire shadows might be Oothoon herself (102-



*In happy copulation; if in evening mild, wearied with work,  
Sit on a bank and draw the pleasures of this free born joy.*

*The moment of desire! the moment of desire! The virgin  
That pines for man, shall awaken her womb to enigmatic joys  
In the secret shadows of her chamber; the youth shut up from  
The lustful joy, shall forget to generate, & create an amorous image  
In the shadows of his curtains and in the folds of his silent pillow.  
Are not these the places of religion, the rewards of continence?  
The self-enjoyings of self-denial? Why dost thou seek religion?  
Is it because acts are not lovely, that thou seekest solitude,  
Where the horrible darkness is unrelieved with collections of desire.*

*Father of Jealousy, be thou accursed from the earth!  
Why hast thou taught my Theotormon this accursed thing?  
Till beauty fades from off my shoulders darken'd and cast out,  
A solitary shadow wailing on the margin of non-entity.*

*I cry, Love! Love! Love! happy happy Love! free as the mountain wind!  
Can that be Love, that drinks another as a sponge drinks water?  
That clouds with jealousy his nights, with weepings all the day;  
To spin a web of rage around him, grey and hoary, dark!  
Till his eyes sicken at the fruit that hangs before his sight,  
Such is self-love that envies all! a creeping skeleton  
With lamplike eyes watching around the frozen marriage bed.*

*But silken nets and traps of adamant will Oothoon spread,  
And catch for thee girls of mild silver, or of furious gold;  
I'll lie beside thee on a bank & view their wanton play  
In lovely copulation blue on blue with Theotormon;  
Red as the rosy morning, lustful as the first born beam,  
Oothoon shall view his dear delight, nor e'er with jealous cloud  
Come in the heaven of generous love; nor selfish blightings bring.*

*Does the sun walk in glorious raiment, on the secret floor*

7. William Blake, *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, 1793, plate 7. Courtesy of the Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection.

03). Does the narrator merely echo Oothoon's despairing possibility? Like Bromion, whose second speech initially supports Oothoon's vision—"knowest thou that trees and fruits flourish upon the earth / To gratify senses unknown" (3:14-15, E 48)—and then abruptly rejects it in asserting "eternal fire, and eternal chains" (3:23,

E 48), the narrator tells Oothoon's story sympathetically but finally denies the larger truth of her progress through time: "the true meaning of time lies in its identity with the spirit of prophecy, for by speaking out, the prophet can reverse the cycles of history and make time an agent of mercy, rather than of destruction."<sup>22</sup>

Much more than a shadowy reflection of Theotormon, Oothoon actually presents a model that Theotormon shadows; not only rent by Bromion after Oothoon is rent, Theotormon also mimes Oothoon's rhetoric, as the following call by Oothoon and response (albeit reductive) from Theotormon reveals:

They told me that the night & day were  
all that I could see;  
They told me that I had five senses to  
inclose me up;  
And they inclos'd my infinite brain into a  
narrow circle.

And then tell me the thoughts of man,  
that have been hid of old.  
(2:30-3:13, E 47)

Tell me what is the night or day to one  
o'erflowed with woe?  
Tell me what is a thought? & of what  
substance is it made?  
Tell me what is a joy? & in what gardens  
do joys grow?

Tell me where dwell the thoughts  
forgotten till thou call them forth  
Tell me where dwell the joys of old! &  
where the ancient loves?  
(3:22-4:4, E 47-48)

Already a shade when we meet him, Theotormon's past grace and glory exist, like Ahania's Urizen or Ophelia's Hamlet, in the memories of those who loved him. The text's final image of Theotormon suggests he becomes a shadow conversing with shadows, fulfilling the dictum of Blake's prophecy on restrained desire: "being restrained it by degrees becomes passive till it is only the shadow of desire" (*Marriage* 5:4-5, E 34). Despite the narrator's grim summary view of Theotormon, Oothoon's insistent questioning effects some small but real progress. On the first day he stops weeping to smile (severely); on the second day Oothoon elicits a verbal response from him. By the end he no longer weeps in front of his cave but engages in conversation.

Given Theotormon's corresponding fall, does Oothoon err in her efforts to awaken him? Those who see Oothoon's failure in her inability to free herself from dependence on Theotormon neglect to consider Oothoon's real options and prophetic commitments. As Theotormon's Emanation, she must effect reintegration with him; choosing another partner unleashes devastating consequences for other pairs in *The Four Zoas* or *Jerusalem*. Nor does Blake present Oothoon with any options: in order to fulfill her desire she can only turn to Theotormon or Bromion the rapist (who Gillham argues is Theotormon).<sup>23</sup> If anything binds Oothoon, it is Blake's system of Emanations. Beyond the constraints imposed by that larger, later system, however, lies the compelling responsibility of the true prophet. Oothoon's daily lamentation signifies her wonderful determination to awaken those around her, providing an early version of the persistent visionary Blake clearly endorses in *Jerusalem*:

Of the Sleep of Ulro! and of the passage  
through  
Eternal Death! and of the wakening to  
Eternal Life.

This theme calls me in sleep night after  
night, & ev'ry morn  
Awakes me at sun-rise, then I see the  
Saviour over me  
Spreading his beams of love, & dictating  
the words of this mild song.

Awake! awake O sleeper of the land of  
shadows, wake! expand!  
I am in you and you in me, mutual in  
love divine:

Trembling I sit day and night, my friends  
are astonish'd at me.  
Yet they forgive my wanderings, I rest  
not from my great task!  
To open the Eternal Worlds, to open the  
immortal Eyes  
(4:1-7, 5:16-18, E 146-47)

Rather than castigate Oothoon's seeming dependence on Theotormon, let us recognize the depth of her resolution. Just as Los must work with his Spectre to build Golgonooza, Oothoon must bring Theotormon to a new level of awareness. And just as Los "built the stubborn structure of the Language, acting against / Albions melancholy, who must else have been a Dumb despair" (*Jerusalem* 36:59-60, E 183), Oothoon moves beyond dumb despair—beyond embracing her own silence and Theotormon's—to use the stubborn structure of language for enlightenment. Taking action through words, Oothoon never surrenders; although Theotormon, Bromion, and Urizen fail to comprehend her prophecy by the end of *Visions*, she embodies the healing mercy of time: in describing an Oothoon who continues to wail, the narrator provides evidence to support the possibility of change. While the narrator does not yet understand, as Oothoon does, how "they inclos'd my infinite brain into a narrow circle" (2:32, E 47), narrative disjunction enables readers to go into and out of the circle Blake's Notebook taunts God with: "If you have formed a Circle to go into / Go into yourself & see how you would do" ("To God," E 516). By framing the narrator's despair with two positive instances in the text—Oothoon's triumphant calls for freedom and the illumination depicting her in flight—Blake enables alternate viewings of the conclusion. Jumping back and forth between the image of Oothoon called up through the narrator's words<sup>24</sup> and the illuminated Oothoon in flight<sup>25</sup> effects the double vision Oothoon possesses when she first sees the Marygold: "I see thee now a flower! now a nymph!" Although I believe we should follow Oothoon's prophetic response and kiss "the joy as it flies" ("Eternity," E 470), the illuminator's final image does not correct the narrator's version so much as balance it. Eyes may see more than hearts know, but hearts



know that at the end of *Visions*, Oothoon remains without Theotormon. The determined expression on Oothoon's face warns us not to condone her lack of fulfillment; at the same time we should heed her words—"Arise and drink your bliss, for every thing that lives is holy!"—to joy in her progress towards prophecy.

While Oothoon does not and cannot approximate a contemporary feminist ideal, she comes closest to bridging the curious gap between Blake's belief in human liberation and his poetic representation of the female. As the best (and perhaps only) active, good female figure, Oothoon occupies a special place in Blake's canon; unlike his more conventional portrayal of females as positive through self-sacrifice (Ololon, *Thel's Lilly*) or perniciously manipulative (Enitharmon, Vala), Oothoon acts through prophetic speeches that render the philosophical principles generally stated by male figures. After *Visions* Blake offers limiting images of women; the feminist possibilities Oothoon embodies seem to disappear. Oothoon herself, however, periodically resurfaces as if Blake means to hold on to the fleeting possibilities she embodies; the rebellious daughter who goes against Enitharmon's reign of sexual delusion in *Europe*, the guard who enables the fulfillment of Leutha's desires after Elynittria brings Leutha to Palamabron's bed in *Milton*,<sup>26</sup> she is, finally, a way into Beulah in *Jerusalem*:

There is a Grain of Sand in Lambeth that  
Satan cannot find  
Nor can his Watch Fiends find it: tis  
translucent & has many Angles  
But he who finds it will find Oothoons  
palace, for within  
Opening into Beulah every angle is a  
lovely heaven

(37:15-18, E 183)

In our current revisioning of Oothoon, I propose we view her through that translucent angle of vision that opens into Beulah.

<sup>1</sup> Susan Fox, "The Female as Metaphor in William Blake's Poetry," *Critical Inquiry* 3 (1977): 507-19. Along with Fox, key articles discussing Blake's representation of the female include Irene Taylor, "The Woman Scaly," *Blake's Poetry and Designs*, ed. Mary Lynn Johnson and John Grant (1973; New York: Norton, 1979) 539-53; Anne K. Mellor, "Blake's Portrayal of Women," *Blake* 16 (1982-83): 148-55; Alicia Ostriker, "Desire Gratified and Ungratified: William Blake and Sexuality," *Blake* 16 (1982-83): 156-65; and Brenda S.

Webster, "Blake, Women, and Sexuality," *Critical Paths: Blake and the Argument of Method*, ed. Dan Miller, Mark Bracher, and Donald Ault (Durham: Duke UP, 1987) 204-24.

<sup>2</sup> All quotations of Blake's poetry are from *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman (Berkeley: U of California P, 1982), hereafter cited as E followed by the page number.

<sup>3</sup> S. Foster Damon identifies *Visions* as a poem of Experience in his *William Blake: His Philosophy and Symbols* (Boston:



Wave shadows of discontent,<sup>1</sup> and in what houses dwell the wretched  
Drunkens with woe forgotten, and shut up from cold despair,

Tell me where dwell the thoughts forgotten all thou call them forth  
Tell me where dwell the joys of old! & where the ancient loves;  
And when will they renew again & the night of oblivion past?  
That I might traverse times & spaces far remote and bring  
Comforts into a present sorrow and a night of pain  
Where poest thou O thought! to what remote land is thy flight?  
If thou returnest to the present moment of affliction  
Will thou bring comforts on thy wings and dew and honey and balm;  
Or poison from the desert wilds, from the eyes of the envious.

Then Bramion said; and shook the cavern with his lamentation

Thou knowest that the ancient trees seen by thine eyes have fruit;  
But knowest thou that trees and fruits flourish upon the earth  
To gratify senses unknown? trees beasts and birds unknown:  
Unknown, not unperceived, spread in the infinite microscope,  
In places yet unvisited by the voyager, and in worlds  
Over another kind of seas, and in atmospheres unknown.  
Ah! are there other wars, beside the wars of sword and fire?  
And are there other sorrows, beside the sorrows of poverty?  
And are there other joys, beside the joys of riches and ease?  
And is there not one law for both the lion and the ox?  
And is there not eternal fire, and eternal chains?  
To bind the phantoms of existence from eternal life?

Then Oothoon waited silent all the day, and all the night.

8. William Blake, *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, 1793, plate 4. Courtesy of the Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection.



Houghton-Mifflin, 1924) 107 and *A Blake Dictionary: The Ideas and Symbols of William Blake* (1965; rpt. Shambhala P, 1979) 437, Northrop Frye considers it part of the doomed Orc cycle in *Fearful Symmetry: A Study of William Blake* (1947; rpt. New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1969) 245, and Harold Bloom notes that Oothoon achieves Organized Innocence but Theotormon never receives her message in *Blake's Apocalypse: A Study in Poetic Argument* (New York: Cornell UP, 1963) 113-16.

<sup>4</sup> Jane E. Peterson, "The Visions of the Daughters of Albion: A Problem in Perception," *Philological Quarterly* 52 (1973): 252-64.

<sup>5</sup> Though the following critics condone aspects of Oothoon's imaginative awakening, they find fault as well; the listing is not meant to be exhaustive but to reflect recent critical trends: Michael G. Cooke, *Acts of Incluston* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1979); Vernon E. Lattin, "Blake's Thel and Oothoon: Sexual Awakening in the Eighteenth Century," *The Literary Criterion* 16 (1981): 11-24; Mark Anderson, "Oothoon: Failed Prophet," *Romanticism Past and Present* 8 (1984): 1-21; Laura Ellen Haigwood, "Blake's *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*: Revising an Interpretive Tradition," *San Jose Studies* 11 (1985): 77-94; and Nelson Hilton, "An Original Story," *Unnam'd Forms: Blake and Textuality*, ed. Nelson Hilton and Thomas A. Vogler (Berkeley: U of California P, 1986) 69-104.

<sup>6</sup> All illustrations of Blake's illuminations are from *The Illuminated Blake*, annot. by David V. Erdman (New York: Anchor P, 1974), and follow Erdman's plate numbers.

<sup>7</sup> Mary Lynn Johnson and John E. Grant, eds., *Blake's Poetry and Designs* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1979) 69.

<sup>8</sup> Erdman (*Illuminated Blake* 125) argues that copy C is the first because of the angel sitting on the female rider's lap; even so, only one of the earliest copies of *Visions* used the frontispiece as tailpiece until Blake changed his mind.

<sup>9</sup> While the issue of who actually narrates what in Blake's works is a complex one, Blake often provides an ostensible narrator, such as the piper of the *Songs of Innocence*, the bards of *Songs of Experience* and *America*, or the Blakean personae of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, *Europe*, *The Book of Urizen*, *Milton*, and *Jerusalem*. *Visions* contains no comparable figure or persona.

<sup>10</sup> Mary Lynn Johnson, "William Blake," *The English Romantic Poets*, ed. Frank Jordan, 4th ed. (New York: MLA, 1985) 218.

<sup>11</sup> John Middleton Murry suggests there were to be other *Visions*, perhaps as there were to be books beyond *The [First] Book*

of *Urizen*, in "A Note on William Blake's Visions of the Daughters of Albion," *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, reproduced in facsimile (London and Toronto: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1932) 11.

<sup>12</sup> W. J. T. Mitchell writes "For Blake, writing does not move in a straight line toward a single version (or vision) of the story. It traces the clash of contraries and subverts the tendency to settle into the fixed oppositions he calls 'Negations,' whether these are the moral antitheses of law and prophecy, the sensory divide between eye and ear, or the aesthetic gulf between word and image" in his "Visible Language: Blake's Wondrous Art of Writing," *Romanticism and Contemporary Criticism*, ed. Morris Eaves and Michael Fischer (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1986) 80.

<sup>13</sup> Erdman (*Illuminated Blake* 130) likens the figure to an "apocalyptic angel [who] pours liquid from a thin vial to drip beside 'weep,'" while Johnson and Grant see "a draped figure [who] holds out what appears to be a dripping paintbrush" (71).

<sup>14</sup> See Harold Bloom, "Commentary," *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman, Berkeley: U of California P, 1982) 901 and Peterson 255.

<sup>15</sup> D. G. Gillham points to Blake's Notebook entry on "Eternity" to gloss Oothoon's response to the Marygold in his *William Blake* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1973) 210: "He who binds to himself a joy / Does the winged life destroy / But he who kisses the joy as it flies / Lives in eternity's sun rise" (E 470).

<sup>16</sup> Excellent accounts abound; readers might turn to Anderson, Gillham, or Peterson for a start.

<sup>17</sup> While we cannot blindly accept the narrator's interpretive statements (does she "howl" or "scream" or "cry"?), we must, at some point, work with the basic physical outline of events (that, for instance, Bromion intercepts her flight towards Theotormon). Like Haigwood (81) I disagree with Bloom's view that Oothoon's writhing limbs indicate her need for sexual fulfillment from Theotormon ("Commentary," 901).

<sup>18</sup> See Hilton 100 and Peterson 259.

<sup>19</sup> *Visions* comes to two hundred twenty-two lines if we include "The Argument" and the motto; Oothoon's final lamentation goes for one hundred two of those lines.

<sup>20</sup> Earlier Haigwood identifies how Oothoon's "either/or construction slams shut the door of dialogue at the same time that it seems to open it: that is, the possible responses are limited in such a way that if the answer doesn't fit the asker's pre-

scribed categories, the person addressed can only be mute" (88).

<sup>21</sup> In *Milton*, for instance, several of Blake's figures promote polygyny, such as the Divine Voice:

She shall begin to give  
Her maidens to her husband: delighting  
in his delight  
And then & then alone begins the happy  
Female joy  
As it is done in Beulah, & thou O Virgin  
Babylon Mother of Whoredoms  
Shalt bring Jerusalem in thine arms in the  
night watches; and  
No longer turning her a wandering  
Harlot in the streets  
Shalt give her into the arms of God your  
Lord & Husband.

(33:17-23, E 133)

<sup>22</sup> Mollyanne Marks, "Time as Hero in Blake's Major Prophecies," *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture*, vol. 5, ed. Ronald C. Rosbottom (Wisconsin: U of Wisconsin P, 1976) 59.

<sup>23</sup> Unlike the heroines of numerous 1960s and 70s novels, Oothoon cannot walk out on Theotormon to find a more enlightened man.

<sup>24</sup> Gillham sees the three figures on the bank in the final plate as Oothoon, Theotormon, and Bromion (195).

<sup>25</sup> See Janet Warner, *Blake and the Language of Art* (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's UP, 1984) 94-95 and E. B. Murray, "A Pictorial Guide to Two-Fold Vision: Copy 'O' of VDA," *Sparks of Fire: Blake in a New Age*, ed. James Bogan and Fred Goss (California: North Atlantic Books, 1982) 165, among others for very different discussions of how to view the final image of Oothoon in flight.

<sup>26</sup> Oothoon also hovers with Leutha over Orc "Opening interiorly into Jerusalem & Babylon shining glorious / Into the Shadowy Females bosom" (18:41-42, E 112) to suggest the kind of female form Orc would have the Shadowy Female wear. Although many read her appearance as negative, I believe she initially represents the possibility of a polygynous marriage that the Shadowy Female rejects; that rejection accounts for the turn towards perversity. Oothoon appears again in the poem's concluding movement toward apocalypse: "soft Oothoon / Pants in the Vales of Lambeth weeping oer her Human Harvest" (42:32-33, E 144).